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Darren Aronofsky's *BLACK SWAN*

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4.4 Metamorphosis and Modulation: Darren Aronofsky's *BLACK SWAN*



BY STEEN CHRISTIANSEN

Black Swan (Darren Aronofsky 2010) tells the story of Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman), a ballerina who dreams of dancing the Swan Queen in *Swan Lake*. When she wins the lead role, Nina slowly begins losing her mind, in a curious and intense mix of melodrama and horror. Pressured by the ballet director Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) and her overbearing mother (Barbara Hershey), Nina first finds escape in her friendship with understudy Lily (Mila Kunis), but begins to suspect that Lily wants to kill her to get her role. Slowly Nina's body also begins to change, culminating in the opening performance, where Nina's body transforms into a terrifying hybrid figure of swan-woman, before Nina falls to her death. In this chapter, I wish to investigate how digital morphing works as a way of figuring biopower, registering the cultural forces of gender, sexuality, and desire. *Black Swan* is exemplary in this regard as Nina becomes the locus of stratifications of power, turning biopower into felt sensations rather than pure abstractions of power. In this analysis, I am tracing the co-construction of an aesthetic logic (the digital morph) and a cultural logic (biopower and corporeal forces). I will read *Black Swan* and its morphing both as a distinctive formal device of post-cinema, and as an articulation of a certain "structure of feeling."

Structure of feeling is a term coined by Raymond Williams in his *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Williams employs it to designate a certain cultural mood, a concern "with meanings

and values as they are actively lived and felt" (Williams 132). Steven Shaviro adapts the term in *Post-Cinematic Affect* to suggest how films and other media works express "a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular" (Shaviro 2). My reading of *Black Swan* is informed by Shaviro's emphasis on the tension between metamorphosis and modulation in Grace Jones' music video "Corporate Cannibal" (Nick Hooker 2008). Shaviro points to Jones' shifting body as a way of expressing racial tensions in particular; *Black Swan* centers more explicitly on gendered tensions, but the struggle between a free-flowing metamorphosis and controlled modulation is similar in both texts (Shaviro 13). In *Black Swan*, oppressive stratifications of gender, sexuality, and desire are registered directly on Nina's body, resulting in her body literally tearing open, while also transforming it into a hybrid body. Through the narrative and the figure of morph, we see how Nina's body is subjected to external forces, which she tries to accommodate while also attempting to express her own desires. The digital morph is therefore the crux of the film, not only revealing central contradictions (an emphasis on self-fulfillment and personal achievement produced by outside demands) but also making sensible the structure of feeling we currently inhabit while serving, as Shaviro puts it, to habituate us to the intensities of neoliberalism (Shaviro 138). The morph can thus be seen as one example of what Shaviro refers to as "intensity effects"—effects that help us endure and negotiate contemporary biopower (Shaviro 138).

Post-Cinema

Post-cinema, as I employ the term here, is strongly influenced by Steven Shaviro's definitive mapping in *Post-Cinematic Affect*, where he argues that cinema has lost its preeminent status as a culturally dominant medium, giving way to music videos, video games, and digital network media. Diagrammed in this way, post-cinema becomes a cultural condition which feeds into financial flows, market forces, and the full range of audiovisual culture (Shaviro 138). While post-cinema is still cinema in the sense that films are still produced, the post-cinematic condition is also to some extent a post-medium condition, where influences, people, formal devices, and technologies all traverse previously distinct media

forms and industries. Other terms, not used by Shaviro, that theorize this contemporary phenomenon and speak to the same movement are remediation, media convergence, transmedia, spreadable media, and others (see Bolter and Grusin; Jenkins; Jenkins, Ford, and Green). Taken together, all these terms speak to the ubiquity of media and the fact that there is a constant cross-pollination, while formerly discrete objects and media texts such as films, television shows, and video games are permeable and shifting. It is as part of this broader field that post-cinematic films now exist, not at the top of some hierarchical media pyramid.

Black Swan may seem, at first glance, an imperfect fit for the concept of post-cinema. As Shaviro points out, simply because some recent films exhibit post-cinematic traits, the majority of films remain cinematic, drawing on the rich pedigree of film history, conventional continuity editing, and so forth. Less visually hyperbolic than *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor 2009), more conventionally edited than *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (Edgar Wright 2010) and drawing its narrative primarily from Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, H.C. Andersen's "The Red Shoes," and the 1948 melodrama *The Red Shoes* (Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell), Aronofsky's film seems almost as cinematic as can be. However, my argument for considering *Black Swan* a post-cinematic film is predicated on its deeply integrated use of digital morphing.

From a pragmatic point of view, morphing is a necessary mechanism for melding Natalie Portman's body with that of a stunt performer in order to produce the long takes of Nina dancing; beyond this, the role of morphing is particularly vital in the scenes depicting Nina's body undergoing physical transformation into a swan-like creature. Morphing, then, becomes a central device for *Black Swan* but also introduces a different logic into conventional filmmaking, that of digital media and the use of computers not only to composite images but also to produce new images. Hardly a novel practice in 2010, the use of digital compositing and morphing still show how the transition from film to digital video opens up new avenues for cinema to explore.

Here we can turn to a different conception of post-cinema as the far more formalist shift described in Garrett Stewart's *Framed Time*. Stewart focuses on narrative techniques and is

primarily interested in the development of new figures of time in what he calls a postfilmic cinema, sharing Shaviro's concern with how digital media influence contemporary articulations of time. Content to propose specific and concrete categories for new films, Stewart is more interested in film aesthetics and less concerned with the cultural ramifications. Yet his concepts such as "tempotation," "digitime," and "framed time" more generally still speak to the continuing development of new post-cinematic forms. Significantly for the concept of the morph, Stewart's argument revolves around the shift to digitization as one which registers as a temporal shift, where digital cinema marks time as "seeming to stand still for internal mutation" (Stewart 3). While Stewart emphasizes the substantial changes to narrative form exemplified in films such as *Lola Rennt* (Tom Tykwer 1998) or *Memento* (Christopher Nolan 2000), I wish to argue that the digital morph is not only a temporal figure but also a spatial one: it marks the moment when the human body becomes elastic, to rework Yvonne Spielmann's concept of "elastic cinema." Spielmann's argument is that digital media—and digital video in particular—"deprive previous media of their concepts of time and space by re-dimensioning shape and form" (Spielmann 59). In other words, the morph becomes emblematic of post-cinematic media in the way that it constantly mutates time and space.

Reading Stewart and Spielmann together, we can see that when film's ontology changes, the cinematic body changes. The materiality of the medium matters. The fact that film becomes digital video creates new affordances and allows for the proliferation of sequences that were once costly to produce but now become trivial. Post-cinema works by altering the cinematic body; the decreased need for pro-filmic events reconfigures cinematic ontology, which has resulted in a revival of the cinema of attractions' emphasis on astonishment, visual change, and transformation (Gunning, "Cinema" and "Aesthetic"). While Spielmann's concept of elastic cinema concerns the cinematic image as a whole, I wish to extend her argument and locate the notions of elasticity and internal mutations as a more general cultural condition that express a biomediated relation to the human body, understood as the way that media co-opt human functions. Vivian Sobchack's work on meta-morphing is exemplary in that she reads the morph as an expression of late-capitalist acceleration (Sobchack, *Meta-Morphing*). Eugene Thacker makes a similar argument in *Biomedica*, where he points out that biology and technology are not distinct forces but exist on a continuum

through which they articulate each other. In essence, Thacker's argument extends from Foucault's earlier argument about biopower as "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies" (Foucault, *Sexuality* Part Five). While Foucault is interested above all in cultural techniques, Thacker insists that technologies and media play a part in how biopower functions.

Drawing on these theories of post-cinema, then, I argue that a post-cinematic ecology is one through which new relations to human bodies emerge, and one of the forms that these new relations take is that of the morph. This is hardly surprising, considering the many ways that the human body has become increasingly malleable physically, including through plastic surgery, liposuction, tattoos, and other body modifications, as well as more ephemerally but with as much impact through digital airbrushing, slimming, stretching, and other digital manipulations of fashion spreads and celebrity images. Going even further, as Thacker's argument indicates, is the full range of biotechnologies, including the conflation of genetic code with computer code. All these techniques participate in the articulation of our bodies, how we relate to them, and what we believe a body can do. Morphing thus becomes central to contemporary conceptions of the body, even to the point where the human body itself may be regarded as a medium.

As such, the post-cinematic media ecology and the digital morph are techniques of biopower, the subjugation of bodies through new media forms. *Black Swan* is exemplary in the tensions it articulates through the narrative's many instances of the working of biopower: Nina pushing her body to extremes, Thomas Leroy's sexual exploitation of Nina's ambitions, the uncanny doubling of Lily as the sexual model for Nina, and finally the mother's abusive control over Nina. All of these narrative techniques of biopower play out across and on Nina's body, but only through the form of the morph can Nina's resistance be figured in the film. Paradoxically, then, Nina's bodily metamorphosis stands as both expression of and resistance to biopower. Unpacking the morph in *Black Swan* reveals the formal manifestations of the contradictions inherent in contemporary biopower.

Morphing

Following Sobchack in her study of morphing, I contend that the digital morph is both a mode of figuration—the way that computers produce a blending together of vector graphics into one image—and a narrative figure, particularly in Nina's gradual metamorphosis throughout the film's progression (Sobchack, *Meta-Morphing* xiii). In this way, the morph is the specific visual expression of a cultural concern with the physical status of the human body and its blurred boundaries, the way power plays out across the human body, and the way new media technologies transform and produce our subjectivities. As figure, the morph produces a distinct sensation in that forces are rendered visible through bodily transformation. As figuration the morph constitutes a specific theory of power, as Rodowick suggests in his work on the figural (Rodowick x). Taken together, the morph as both figure and figuration allows us to experience the way biopower *feels*, the forces and intensities we are subjected to. Only thus can we begin to understand how biopower works, since biopower is precisely the subjugation of bodies.

At its simplest, morphing is the seamless transition between two visual images. While dissolves, double exposures, cross-fading, and other transitions have long been standard practice and account for many of cinema's most memorable bodily transformations, the digital video image is far more malleable than celluloid film. Digital video and computer software enable a more seamless transition between two (or more) images, so that scenes and sequences of both narrative transformations and post-production composited body stand-ins become far more readily available in a post-cinematic image economy. A good example of morphing is found in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson 2002) where King Theoden (Bernard Hill) goes from old to young in one continuous shot. Done primarily through make-up and prosthetics, several shots were morphed into one seamless whole. My emphasis on a more seamless transition enabled by computer software should indicate the historical nature of seamlessness. While the double exposures in *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau 1922) thrilled its contemporaneous audiences, today's audiences are more likely to feel awkwardly aware of the double exposure. We are more likely to marvel at Portman's ability to dance en pointe and do frotté, because the morphing between Portman and her dance double Sarah Lane appears seamless, exceeding our standards for

visual verisimilitude (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Whose feet, Natalie Portman's or Sarah Lane's? (Frame grab from BLACK SWAN, Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

While I have no interest in engaging with the controversy that ensued over how much dancing Portman did on her own, what does interest me about the morphing of the two performers' images is the altered relationship of the actor to the digital camera. The opening sequence, which shows Nina dancing the Swan Queen for several minutes, is a good example of the imperceptibility of when exactly Lane takes over. Indistinguishable to the human eye (at least as it is currently configured), we know that digital morphing has been employed in the sequence, but we cannot locate the exact moments when Lane's and Portman's bodies mingle and separate again. This suggests a new kind of intimacy among actors' bodies and the camera, while it also suggests a diffused embodiment.

Shot on digital video, the two actors' bodies become interchangeable, although the

morphing process privileges Portman's face and to an unknown extent Lane's body. Portman's performance is intensified in the process, allowing her performance (as a composite) to extend beyond its usual limitations. Such intensity draws us further into the film, increasing our immersion more than if the opening scene had been a montage, or even a traditionally edited scene. Unable to identify when the morphing takes place, we are immersed into the sequence as an unbroken whole. Of course, the performance is diffused between two performing bodies, but we should also keep in mind a third body, that of the computer, which becomes the medium in which and through which the two performing bodies blend into one.

While a form of this diffused embodiment is also found in classical cinema, with the use of stunt doubles, body doubles, and a range of stand-ins used to enhance performances, what is unusual about post-cinematic performance and the digital morph is the co-extensive presence of two bodies in the same frame, blended into one body. The practice of morphing is therefore inherently uncanny because it presents us with a double, something both familiar and radically other, pulling together metaphysical and political contradictions. In her theory of the digital video body, Marks reads the morph as uncanny:

The uncanniness of morphing speaks to a fear of unnatural, transformable bodies. If digital video can be thought to have a body, it is a strikingly queer body, in the sense that queer theory uncouples the living body from any essence of gender, sexuality, or other way to be grounded in the ontology of sexual difference. (Marks 152)

While the opening scene of *Black Swan* is uncanny because we recognize that Portman in all likelihood did not dance the full sequence herself, this is only a very basic example of the volatility of Nina's body in the film, and of the post-cinematic body (my term for Marks' digital video body) more generally. I argue that the post-cinematic body is more volatile than ever, no longer entirely human but instead comprising a multiplicity of variables—consisting of several performers in combination with computer software. The morph, seen in this way, becomes a locus for the confluence of media technologies and human bodies. Morphing software interjects nonhuman agencies into the performing bodies, not only penetrating deeper into the human body, but effectively altering it, turning

it into a composite of flesh and pixels. What arises in *Black Swan* is the terrifyingly beautiful woman-swan-hybrid body, which articulates the stresses and intensities of biomediated power.

Modulation

Change the code and the body changes. For all its simplicity, this encapsulates the logic of biopower and we find this pervasive logic constantly enacted in *Black Swan*. A range of cultural codes and logics made manifest on her body always pressures Nina. In the beginning of the film, Nina pushes her body and accepts pain and injury as part of the ballerina's body. In a scene where Nina rehearses en pointe pirouettes, several close-ups of her foot are accompanied by the audible creak of the wooden floor, hinting at the weight put on her toes and building suspense through repetition. While the image slows down, ominous music builds and snaps just as Nina's toes give in. Reaction shots of Nina's face in pain, emphasized by the music's deep tones, make us flinch (see Figure 2). A visceral sensation of extreme discomfort erupts as we see her bloodied toes (see Figure 3), signifying the price Nina willingly pays for her art and a life under biopower. While relatively minor considering the intensities we face later in the film, the injured toe is not only a forceful indicator of what is to come, but it also suggests the workings of biopower.

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Figure 2 – Nina in pain (Frame grab from BLACK SWAN, Darren Aronofsky, 2010)



Figure 3 – Nina's bloody toes (Frame grab from *BLACK SWAN*, Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

The drive and ambition which leads Nina to abuse her body in this way expresses well the contradictions through which biopower exists. Rosi Braidotti suggests in her work on feminist theory and metamorphosis that “[b]iopower constructs the body as a multi-layered entity that is situated over a multiple and potentially contradictory set of variables” (Braidotti 229). We cannot separate Nina's ambitions from her mother Erica's (Barbara Hershey) dreams and wishes on Nina's (and her own) behalf, alongside cultural expectations of always doing one's best, making the most of oneself, and achieving self-fulfillment. For Nina, self-fulfillment can only be achieved through her body, explaining the extreme regimen she lives under, declining cake for grapefruits and developing an eating disorder (we see her throwing up at one point as a result of stress). This neoliberal entrepreneurship of the self indicates the extent to which our lives and behavior are not free but circumscribed by the environment in which we live. Our actions are therefore reactions to actions from somewhere else.

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Foucault argues that we are measured based on our ability to produce an income, which is why we become entrepreneurs of ourselves (Foucault, *Biopolitics* 226). That is to say, we endeavor to make sure that our income is optimal and that we ourselves are optimal for producing an income. For this reason, we must improve and optimize our bodies. While we think, according to Foucault, that the bodies we are born with are free, come at no charge, this is in fact not true. Instead, our bodies are abilities-machines and we must ensure that they work as efficiently as possible (Foucault, *Biopolitics* 229). For Nina, this manifests as a range of paradoxes. She must be disciplined and avoid temptation in order to be the best dancer she can be (essentially her mother's wishes), yet she must be sexually active and give in to pleasure to be the best Black Swan she can be (Thomas's argument), and finally, she must be free-willed and independent (which is what Lily wants). These different impulses run counter to one other, yet Nina is tasked with resolving them. To be a proper entrepreneur of oneself, one must be increasingly flexible. Nina's body, then, is the conflicted site of several people's desires, including her own, her mother's, Thomas's, and particularly Lily's; as these conflicting desires trigger Nina's dark metamorphosis, violence erupts.

This is why Marks's argument about the queer (cinematic) body is so relevant in the case of Nina, whose body is certainly coded as queer. In addition to the fact that she has sex with both male and female bodies on the screen, Nina's body is queer in a deeper sense: it is unruly and unstable, resisting the astonishing amount of discipline she imposes on it through her training. Any emotional or physical expression on Nina's part is immediately disciplined by Erica or Thomas, both of whom pressure her to regulate her body's experience of food, drugs and alcohol, sexual stimulation, friendship, and even solitude, all in the desire to perfect her dance performance. As the scene of her mangled toe foreshadowed, the more pressure Nina endures, the more her body buckles. While much of this corporeal warping reflects Nina's unstable mind, it is telling that the line between dance injuries, biopower modulations, and the liberating metamorphosis for which Nina strives are constantly blurred. Everything ultimately comes back to Nina's body and the impact on that body of the forces visited upon her. This is how I understand modulation: forces enacted on our bodies. As Shaviro argues, "modulation requires an underlying fixity," which in this case I take to be the regime of power under which Nina lives (Shaviro 13).

As I demonstrated above, the post-cinematic body is an assemblage of older cinematic logics, such as uncanny doubling and cross-fades, combined with new forms of (bio)media logics whereby digital imaging and animation produce a new, more malleable, conception of the body through its subjugation to new media technologies. As Thacker points out,

The binary code informing the body of digital anatomy makes explicit and materializes Foucault's suggestion that the relation between discourse-language and the body-materiality is one of docility, a "technology" of bodily production. Change the code, and you change (render docile) the body hardwired as that code. This is the strange indissociability and distinctness of the digital image: the binary code doesn't "signify" a body separate from it, yet the unintelligible string of data and the image on the screen are, in some important way, distinct from each other. (Thacker, "Digital Anatomy")

Yet, the figure of the morph also expresses the desire to escape and resist the technologies of bodily production. As much as Nina's body deforms from the pressures placed on her, her metamorphosis into the Black Swan is as much a way of getting out from under, or producing a line of flight away from, the control exerted on her body. We can see how these pressures are made sensible through the bodily deformations constantly jolting our body. Even a smaller injury such as a hangnail arrests us when Nina ends up tearing a chunk of skin off her finger in a shaky close-up with a musical stinger for emphasis (see Figure 4). The line between our body and Nina's body is tenuous and permeable as well, partly because of the film's point of view: we cannot always tell if Nina is hallucinating or not. *Black Swan* makes us feel what it means to live under biopower, where power and force manifest corporeally, as a delimitation of bodily expression and fullness. While one might expect that a film about ballet dancing would emphasize sensations of lightness and freedom of movement, the film feels heavy, weighed down, full of collisions and breakdowns that induce what Vivian Sobchack, discussing animation, refers to as "the incredible effortfulness of being" (Sobchack, "Animation").

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Figure 4 – Nina peeling back her skin (Frame grab from *BLACK SWAN*, Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

Sobchack's larger point is that (especially digital) animation has a tendency to obfuscate the labor which goes into producing animated films or special effects (Sobchack, "Animation" 384). Although extending the scope of her argument somewhat, I believe the morph is the perfect example of such obfuscated labor since by its very nature it is contingent on the fluid and seamless integration of multiple images into one. These digital effects succeed precisely because there is no distinction between the digital morph animation and the digital video of which the shots consist; they are both made up of the same digits, ones and zeroes. While Nina's bodily metamorphosis, achieved through the digital morph process, is almost by definition fluid and seamless, *Black Swan* insists on displaying the corporeal effects of biopower. Through intense sensations of deformation and pain, the film rejects the notion that living under biopower is somehow ephemeral. The digital post-cinematic body in this instance asserts itself through scenes of visceral impact, emphasizing the felt energies of biopower. The figure of the morph therefore comes across as resistance and rejection;

while the morph is a corporeal concrescence of adaptability and fluid quick-change, Nina's metamorphosis is a way of negotiating biopower. Here we find again the tension between metamorphosis and modulation.

Metamorphosis

Nina's metamorphosis through the film indicates, as I have argued, her struggle with and rejection of the biopower pressures she experiences. As she desperately tries to reject her subjugation, Nina's body warps and tears, thus registering the destructive corporeal effects of biopower. Essentially, Nina's metamorphosis expresses what Gilles Deleuze has referred to as "affective athleticism," although in the case of *Black Swan* this is a stunted and crippled athleticism, becoming something else (Deleuze 9). For Deleuze, athleticism is the body's attempt to escape itself (Deleuze 14), which is exactly what Nina does by constantly pushing herself to and beyond her limits. Her deformation reaches towards perfection but is held back by the fixity of the people around her. What matters for Nina is not grounded in sexual desire; she never shows interest in exploring her sexuality or even her gender. In a Deleuzian-Guattarian vocabulary, Nina does not want to become-woman, she wants to become-animal, to step outside human ontology and become something else entirely. This precarious state of Nina's body constantly oscillates between the repulsive and the attractive; her metamorphosis is both disgusting in its bodily abjection and fascinating in its visual spectacle.

Disgust is one of the fundamental responses we feel at Nina's bodily transformation, in which feathers from within rupture her skin. This disgust is directed both at the injury of the body and the breaching of the skin as a safe harbor from the outside world, marking Nina as taboo and unclean, what Julia Kristeva terms abject: "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). Not only are we viscerally unsettled, feeling queasy as we witness the matter of Nina's body break down and the painful piercing of her skin by sharp quills, we are also unsettled because the skin is symbolic of our identity, our bodily integrity, and

breaching the skin therefore triggers an anxiety over identity (see Figure 5). Seeing what is under the skin is inherently sickening and disrupts our sense of a unified self. Nina's transformation into an animal only makes this disgust even more intense.



Figure 5 - Feathers rupturing the skin (Frame grab from **BLACK SWAN**, Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

Yet at the same time, things are a little more complicated. First of all, we know that what repulses us also attracts us; the metamorphosis of Nina's body becomes strangely fascinating in itself. The bodily metamorphosis becomes a visualization of desire through other means. Certainly we are repulsed by the blood and gore; we want to turn away as our innards churn, yet at the same time we cannot take our eyes off this disgustingly affective dissolution of body, identity, and character. Nina balances on the border between person and thing; she remains only marginally human, somewhere on the wrong side of a cultural boundary, but we are drawn to this transgression as well. We see Nina's struggle between social pressures and her own desires—Nina seems inhuman in her refusal to truly engage

with anything beyond her performance, everything and everyone becomes subsumed to that one goal. In this quest, we can only cheer her on, feel for her, sympathize with her plight, and thereby question the social categories and boundaries that Nina physically attempts to transcend.

If desire is the opposite of disgust, desire is also far more fluid, plural, and amorphous. In itself, the morph functions as desire for changeability and adaptation, just as our desires always change form and morph into something new. Nina's desire is to become the Swan Queen and dance perfectly. Our desire, conversely, is to see the fascinating spectacle of Nina's becoming, but the central paradox of this desire is that it is disgusting. As Sianne Ngai points out, disgust demands assent, as it arrests and polices the boundaries between self and other (Ngai 335). While desire feeds on ambivalence, disgust clarifies what is permissible and what is not. For this reason, it is problematic that Nina's desire passes through disgust as disgust disrupts our desire. A specific example of this disruption of desire through disgust is the unsettling sex scene between Nina and Lily. Before the film's release, the presence of a sex scene between Portman and Kunis garnered much attention, yet it is hard to imagine the actual scene satisfying the male gaze as much as was expected. Not only is the scene quite straitlaced and proper in terms of what is shown, but morphing and animation make the scene unsettling by shifting the object of the gaze. A lesbian sex scene in a mainstream film conventionally speaks directly to the male gaze; it objectifies the female bodies and entices the male voyeur. However, the scene not only morphs Lily's face into Nina's for a split second, indicating the ambiguous status of the scene, but also makes Nina's skin come alive on its own. Layers of bird skin ripple up and down Nina's body while a wrenching, fleshy sound murmurs under the score. Taken together, these effects turn Nina's body queer, disturbing, and uncanny. Any desire evoked by the images of the two women in bed together turns to disgust and complicates the male gaze's easy objectification. Denied its usual detached position as an outside point of view, the male gaze is brought into dangerous, contagious contact with the scene, unexpectedly becoming viscerally involved instead. This scene's juxtaposition of sex and morphing provokes an overflow of cultural boundaries that disrupts the traditional subject position of the male body as bounded and safe, outside affection.

The metamorphosis Nina undergoes wrenches her from a controlled social position, turning her into a dangerous free-willed woman. *Black Swan* positions Nina not so much in her social station or mobility, nor in her revolt against norms or cultural taboos. Certainly Nina remains a relatively meek woman (or even girl) throughout the film, well aware of her place. But later in the film, Nina steps outside the social order as her body transforms; her metamorphosis into a horrid human-animal hybrid casts her into all the unclean categories of abjection. This unruliness of the body is consequently regarded as disruptive and so subjected to control. Kristeva's argument about the abject is precisely that the abject threatens to pulverize the subject (Kristeva 5). Therefore, the unruly body must be disciplined so that subjectivity can be maintained. Thus the attraction of the post-cinematic morph is also the repulsion of the uncontrollable body. Nina becomes, by all accounts, a "scary woman," to employ Sobchack's terminology.

In "Scary Women," a chapter in her book *Carnal Thoughts*, Sobchack argues that female embodiment is complicated through its various stages of aging, and that many horror and monster films correlate aging women with monsters. Sobchack points out that the female body becomes a monster through a conflation of self-recognition—the female body in the monster, and the monstrous nature of the (old) female body (Sobchack, *Carnal* 41). While Sobchack primarily discusses the use of cosmetic surgery to "correct" this monstrous flesh, she also points to the fact that cinema is inherently involved in forms of cosmetic surgery, in its ability to "fix" the female body—both in the sense of repair and stasis (Sobchack, *Carnal* 50). Scary women and their bodies are thus placed between metamorphosis and modulation as well; remanded to remain beautiful, their very transformation is what makes them scary. Their bodies become unruly through metamorphosis, even though metamorphosis is what is expected of them. As such, the morphing of scary women expresses the paradoxical and impossible demands visited upon women's bodies.

The morph is precisely the confluence of repair and stasis, as Sobchack argues, on the one hand, and the obfuscation of the labor inherent in the digital production of seamlessness on the other. Although Nina is young, her metamorphosing body produces the same visceral disgust Sobchack emphasizes, but it does so seamlessly and effortlessly, while constantly colliding with the effortfulness of being I emphasized earlier. The fluidity of the morph

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makes the morph impossible to pin down; the morphing body expresses both the desire for seamless and effortless smoothness and the disgust at monstrous and disruptive transformation. In this way, the morph simultaneously critiques and maintains biopower. While I cannot help but see *Black Swan* as an articulation of the embodied violence visited upon women in contemporary society, I accept that others may see only misogyny perpetuated, especially since no workable solution is provided for Nina (and by extension women in general). Such is the nature of ideology, constantly morphing itself.

What I do think is evident is how *Black Swan* and post-cinema more generally participates in a prosthetic culture, where the human body is fully immersed in a flow of technological effects, most clearly expressed through the figure of the morph. Contemporary media ecologies are obsessed with fluidity and changeability, and the digital morph is only one example among many such liquid forms. Contemporary animation in general, and its particular uses in videos like Grace Jones's "Corporate Cannibal" or Aphex Twin's "Come to Daddy" with its clone-faced children, all speak to the same fascination with doubling, cloning, metamorphosis, and overall fluidity. In a sense, the human body exists in a post-medium condition in which bodily experiences and sensations are articulated through biomedicine and biopower. Nina's tribulations portray how lived experience is conditioned and delimited by biopower's forms.

The morph, as one element of post-cinematic logic, expresses the uncanny, queer potential of digital video and the way that biology and technology seamlessly blur together. The post-cinematic body and the human body under biopower both become malleable, changeable objects open to endless iterations. The lack of essence speaks to a performative function of the body; the body is what it does, rather than a pre-defined structure. As such, the morph indicates a zone of indiscernibility between biology and technology and so dislodges any sense of stable embodiment in the post-cinematic image. Bodies on screen are no longer attached to any prior ontology; pro-filmic space and time no longer have any ontological stability. Instead, the post-cinematic image becomes elastic, open to any mutation or deformation, capable of taking on any form. The dimensions of space and time become attenuated and lose significance as the image can transcend either dimension at will. While similar effects have long been possible, it is their intensification and ready availability that

fundamentally transforms cinema into post-cinema.

While the narrative of *Black Swan* never explicitly engages with media technologies as an integral part of the human body, the film still expresses the underlying logic of a body that is subject to multiple variations. Embodiment becomes diffused and stretched over more than one point; embodiment becomes a network of nodes of computer software and multiple performers. No longer located in a single body, post-cinematic performance consists of a larger-scale assemblage than traditional cinema. The long takes of Nina dancing are only possible through such an assemblage, which produces distinct forms and sensations. Digital morphing and animation allow for the triumphant pinnacle of Nina's transformation through which the film gains much of its force.

Morphing's formal, aesthetic logic expresses the cultural logic of *Black Swan* and post-cinema more generally: the way that biopower functions as a binding together of control and force. *Black Swan* reveals the corporeal and affective nature of this binding together; the body's deformations are expressions of the subjugations under which our subjectivities are currently placed. Existing in a state of tension between metamorphosis and modulation, Nina's body becomes trapped within a confined set of possibilities. Although on the one hand she achieves her goal of transcending herself and becoming the Swan Queen (see Figure 6), there is finally no line of flight away from the price of this bodily transgression—Nina dies as a figure of the impossibility of escaping biopower.

4.4 Metamorphosis and Modulation: Darren Aronofsky's BLACK SWAN



Figure 6 – Nina transformed into the Swan Queen (Frame grab from BLACK SWAN, Darren Aronofsky, 2010)

If metamorphosis is the ability to move across and between categories, modulation signals the fact that there is no way to move outside of such categories. Nina's body is constantly in pain because its metamorphosis collides with biopower's modulation; all the people around her represent the constrictions of society. Mothers, fathers, lovers—all converge to limit what Nina can become. This is why, in the end, the post-cinematic body is a matter of deformation, a stunted and crippled becoming which exists under biopower's modulation. Nina's body expresses this violence, revealing the logic of sensation or structure of feeling we inhabit.

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